THE GREAT EXPOSITION

a play in two acts

Cast (in order of appearance)

ELLORIE
HENRY
BELLA
LUCAS
DAVID RODAXLE
DR. MARY COBELL
IMKE RITSEMA
MARCIN SZEF
A HECKLER

ACT ONE

in which the Center is Exposed

A town hall-esque panel is about to be held in a grassy clearing in Chicago's Jackson Park on a crowded but otherwise pleasant late spring day. Before the panelists take the stage, ELLORIE is picking between modest sandwiches on the catered food table. ELLORIE looks up and sees LUCAS, HENRY, and BELLA approaching. The four are Third Years at the University of Chicago.

ELLORIE.
Greetings, my friends!

HENRY.
(grinning, nodding). Ellorie.

BELLA.
(grinning, head tilted). Ellorie.

The four pick at the buffet table.

LUCAS.
Ooh! Carrots!

ELLORIE.
(facing LUCAS). I didn't know you all were coming to this thing! Uh, where are you all sitting?

LUCAS.
Not sure. We just got here.

ELLORIE.
I've been here for ages. (laugh). I'm scheming a summer internship with the architect on the panel here.

LUCAS.
Wow. Look at you.

HENRY.
How do you even do architecture any more? Post-Carrington?

ELLORIE.
It's all digital still, everything just takes longer. But apparently people need architects even more now.

BELLA.
Wait, Henry, I saw Bill Ayers on the sign up sheet when I registered at Ida Noyes. I think he's here.

ELLORIE.
(chiming in). What? The Velvet Under—I mean, the Weather Underground guy?

LUCAS.
(chuckling). Okay, I don't believe *for a second* that you thought it was the Velvet Underground, actually. You *knew* it was the Weather Underground. You were trying to be funny, right?

ELLORIE.
Okay, Lucas. I'm guilty. Is Bill Ayers—is he actually here?

HENRY.
(shrugging). Hold on. I don't know who that is.

BELLA.
You don't?!

HENRY.
(gesturing to the panelists coalescing on stage). Is he the architect?

LUCAS, BELLA, and ELLORIE.
No.

A sudden pause, tense then sympathetic.

BELLA.
Bill Ayers was a left-wing terrorist from the 60s who planted bombs everywhere to *take a stand* against *American imperialism*. And the Weather Underground was the terrorist organization he led.

ELLORIE.
Bella. He wasn't a terrorist, *per se*.

BELLA.
(rolling her eyes). Sure. Sure.

ELLORIE.
Actually—hold on. I'm gonna introduce myself before it starts.

BELLA.
To whom?

ELLORIE.
Nice. The architect, Marcin Szef.

LUCAS.

I wouldn't do that. He's about to go on stage.

ELLORIE.
That's why it has to be now. He'll be surrounded after.

BELLA.
Ellorie.

ELLORIE.
I need exactly one minute.

Ellorie moves toward the stage. Ten feet from Marcin. She waves but is unreceived.

LUCAS.
Well?

ELLORIE.
He's very well protected.

The four sit two-by-two near the back of the event and snack on their sandwiches. Clapping. DAVID RODAXLE walks on the makeshift stage, shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries with DR. MARY COBELL, IMKE, and MARCIN—all seated.

HENRY.
(whispering). Is that David Rodaxle?

LUCAS.
Ding ding ding.

DAVID RODAXLE.
(approaching the podium, saccharine). Good afternoon to everyone here in the audience. Thank you for coming out on this beautiful sunny day here in Jackson Park.

A break; a silence held too long.

As senior advisor to President Barack Obama these past seven years, it is my great pleasure to include everyone here today in the first of what we're calling our "plein air" meetings to audiences around the country, starting here in Chicago. On the stage with me we have Dr. Mary Cobell, professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, and also an old friend of mine from all the way back from my, uhh, undergraduate days at the U of C. Hi, Mary.

DR. MARY COBELL.
(jocular). Hi, David. What a delight. Thank you for putting this together.

DAVID.
Thank Obama!

Canned laughter. Audience claps.

HENRY.
(whispering). They *definitely* dated.

LUCAS.
(whispering). No, I can tell she *hates* him.

BELLA.
(whispering back). Your statements are nonexclusive and are both likely true.

DAVID.
Uhh. Next, we have Imke Ritsema, Chief Executive Officer of the foundation to oversee the Barack Obama Presidential Center. Imke, thank you indeed.

IMKE RITSEMA.
Thank you so much for having me, David.

DAVID.
Of course.

Audience claps.

DAVID.
And last but not least, we have, uhh, the architect Marcin Szef. If you haven't heard the news, allow me to break it to you. Marcin's firm, the, uhh, Chicago-based John Ronan Architects, was selected—I believe—earlier this morning to design the Center.

MARCIN SZEF.
(nodding). Thank you.

DAVID.
(hastily). Let's give Marcin a round of applause!

Audience claps.

LUCAS.
(to HENRY). *That's* the architect.

DAVID.
(precipitately). Oh—and another round for our whole panel as well, please!

Audience claps.

DAVID.
(returning to the podium, adjusting his glasses). I want to begin by telling a short but serious story… Three years ago on this day, this country entered one of its most difficult chapters in modern memory. Within a matter of hours, all our assumptions about the way society functions disappeared. One burst of solar electromagnetic radiation neutralized America's—and much of the world's—telecommunications infrastructure, internet service, broadcasting networks, and navigation equipment. Its run-on effects spelled challenges unheard of for Americans. Not since World War Two has this nation mobilized its resources on so great a scale in order to secure our way of life and restore faith in our government in times of great crisis. The Carrington Disaster has uprooted all of our lives.

LUCAS.
(to HENRY). Sorry, I know this is—is this too much?—

HENRY.
It's fine. My mom—It's just—three years.

LUCAS.
I'm so sorry.

HENRY.
It's fine.

DAVID.
The last three years have taught us something uncomfortable: modern society is more vulnerable than we wanted to believe. But it also taught us something valuable: we, as Americans, are more capable than we realized. This is what the, uhh, Barack Obama Presidential Center symbolizes—capability.

It is the goal of the President to—

A HECKLER.
(unintelligible, shouting). America…! Falling apart…! What end…?!

DAVID RODAXLE and the panelists lurch up. The four students turn their heads toward the disturbance, alert but unalarmed yet.

DAVID.
That's, uhh, not—.

HECKLER.
(gesturing wildly, haranguing). We don't need it! We don't need it! Nobody needs it! This is five hundred million dollars wasted on vanity! Look around you!

The HECKLER knocks over a chair in the front row.

HENRY.
(emboldened, calling toward the heckler). What—what would you do with the money instead?

HECKLER.
(turning, wild-eyed). Give it back to the people!

HENRY.
Which people?

HECKLER.
The victims!—

Security does its job.

Screaming.

BELLA.
(grabbing Henry, tentative and worried). We're leaving? Right?

HENRY.
Holy shit.

LUCAS.
(exasperated). We're leaving.

ELLORIE.
Okay.

ACT TWO

in which the Center cannot Hold

Weeks have passed. ELLORIE, LUCAS, BELLA, and HENRY see MARCIN seated inside a cafe, notepad sketching aimlessly.

ELLORIE.
Hey! You were on the Obama Center panel last month, right?

MARCIN.
(grimacing.) Yes, I was the architect.

HENRY recalls and subtly nods.

ELLORIE.
I'm Ellorie. Marcin Szef, right?

MARCIN.
Correct.

HENRY.
(interrupting). Hi, I'm Henry. Nice to meet you.

HENRY shakes MARCIN's hand. LUCAS does too, then BELLA.

ELLORIE.
I'm so sorry that the project was scrapped.

MARCIN.
I appreciate that.

ELLORIE.
I—I can't shake the thought of what happened at that panel.

MARCIN.
I do not think that I will ever forget it. It was terrible.

They pause.

MARCIN.
Hey. (pensive). I remember you. You wanted to talk about the design of the Center when I was getting on stage, no?

ELLORIE.
Yes, that was me. I was waving my hands around like a maniac.

MARCIN.
(caught by surprise, he laughs). Well, it hardly matters much anymore but I want to show you something.

Marcin holds up his notepad.

MARCIN.
We conceived of this space—a space I was extremely proud of… at the time. It was pensive and sensitive and poignant. Look. (he interrupts himself). I'll show you!

Marcin rifles through his notepad to an old page.

MARCIN.
(sketching). We would have built a monument to the Carrington victims—like—this.

HENRY nods.

ELLORIE.
Wow.

MARCIN.
(flipping through, closing his eyes). And over here would have been an archive dedicated to the recovery efforts of each state and territory.

ELLORIE.
Incredible.

MARCIN.
(MARCIN waves his hand into a fist). Onto the next thing…

ELLORIE.
(shocked that the words came out, watery eyes). I need to work for you.

MARCIN looks down at his notepad, hesitates, and looks up.

MARCIN.
Come by our office tomorrow and we can chat. We have an internship program. It's mostly flare-proofing work—preparing for the next one. Bring a resume if you can get one printed.

ELLORIE.
I will. Thank you so much!

HENRY.
(to MARCIN). Did the Obamas pay you for your work?

MARCIN.
I do not think that we will be paid.

HENRY.
Damn.

ELLORIE.
(fastidious). Okay. I'm really glad I had the chance to meet you.

MARCIN.
You too.

ELLORIE, LUCAS, BELLA, and HENRY return to their table.

ELLORIE.
He hated me. I could tell.

BELLA.
Hmm. I don't think so. He essentially offered you a job.

LUCAS.
A *job* means practically nothing. Look at how Obama fired him, stiffed him, and took his work away. And, Ellorie, this is less than a job. It's an internship.

ELLORIE.
I'm—I know. I know that.

Curtain.